



Jobs summit felt like radical shift for the good

Megan Lilly, Head of Education and Training for the national employer association Ai Group

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I headed to last week's Jobs and Skills Summit with cautious optimism. Summits of this type are rare events. They are also high profile with an abundance of expectation. On Friday my expectations were exceeded, and the caution was removed from my optimism.

Skills featured everywhere throughout the two days of the Summit. Every speaker mentioned not only the immediacy of the current challenges but recognised the need for genuine and sustainable reform. Many lamented the seemingly intractable nature of the problems with the skills system, expressing frustration on lack of progress over too many years. However, the conversation at the Summit shifted. The Prime Minister's opening salvo revealing that the Commonwealth and States had agreed to embark on a training blitz immediately ratcheted up the dial, committing an extra one-billion dollars for TAFE fee-free training places in 2023.

Included in the Summit outcomes was also the intention to establish Jobs and Skills Australia as a matter of priority. This independent agency with tripartite governance will create a new conversation about skills and our skilling system. Jobs and Skills Australia, among other things, will be charged with the important task of strengthening our workforce planning, enabling development of a national skills plan.

To me the most important difference Jobs and skills Australia can make is that of strategic national leadership. To drive a bold reform agenda that prepares and delivers on the immediate, medium and long-term skill needs requires equally bold leadership. Jobs and Skills Australia can deliver this but the opportunity must not be wasted by tweaking and shuffling. The new agency needs to articulate a clarity of purpose and a clear roadmap as to how we can meet the current and emerging skill needs that build toward a high skilled, high paid, productive economy.

Reform is always a contested process. The Summit laid the foundation for the dialogue to commence with all parties around the table. We also need vision. If we are really serious about focussing our education and training sector on our future needs we need a coherent and connected tertiary sector – a sector that equally values vocational and higher education in a fluid, seamless and dynamic way. Full implementation of the Noonan Review of the Australian Qualifications Framework is an essential first step.

We also need a tertiary system that consistently provides high quality, trusted education and training, worthy of our investment. This means lifting our game on funding and regulation to ensure every dollar invested – public or private – delivers for as all.

Entry level training, such as our apprenticeship system, needs major reinvigoration, but we also need to focus on the skills of those currently in the workforce, to ensure their skills remain contemporary. This will involve developing a lifelong learning framework that builds skilling options for existing workers and mature age people seeking employment.

A particular focus is on developing a range of ‘industry endorsed’ micro-credentials enabling shorter, sharper and targeted upskilling and reskilling. Careers are no longer linear and predictable, and every worker – young and old – needs to be flexible, adaptable and capable of rethinking how best to use and grow their skills and capabilities.

We need a national strategy that includes digital capability standards and a framework that supports the digital transformation and enablement of our economy. Nobody should be left behind. We need to provide the skills to power our companies, large and small. Industry knows this, but the education and training system struggles to keep pace.

The final note of optimism for me was the starting and enduring focus on gender throughout the Summit. This ranged from women’s workforce participation and economic security, board and senior executive representation and of course the gender pay gap. Everyone from all perspectives joined in on this issue emphasising we can no longer just keep talking about it. To me it felt like a shift, a significant shift.